

Shrieks and screams abound. It was overwhelming. I was immediately concerned that I had made a major mistake. Could I really manage twenty-nine seventh graders in the woods without any help? I had underestimated, or more accurately not at all foreseen the excitement that would happen the first time we went into the woods. The wooded trails are part of a small park located directly behind our school. Our phys ed teacher uses the ball field adjacent to the woods daily in the spring. Yet, my students had never actually been in the wooded area of the park. Taking my students into the woods to experiment with art making was risky for me, but that was also what I was asking of them. How could I expect my students to go beyond their comfort zone, if I wasn't willing to do the same myself?

Taking risks and bringing new approaches to teaching art into my classroom was the influence of Dr. Sydney Walker's class, *Art as Meaning Making*. Opening myself up to taking risks, is just one part of Dr. Walker's philosophy, which centers on the use of "big ideas" in art class, enabling students to create artwork with meaning; while incorporating techniques and processes used by contemporary artists. Changing my practices as teacher, aligning more with Dr. Walker's approach would effect the structure of my lesson plans, the amount of discourse and reflection about art happening in the classroom, increase the level of student engagement and sometimes even change the physical environment in which we worked. This pedagogy has revolutionized my classroom, with changes that are and, like contemporary art practices themselves, will always be in the process of evolution.

While, as an artist I understand that artworks conveyed meaning, as a teacher I saw my job to teach in the way I had been taught; to educate students in the use materials and techniques, so that "someday" they may incorporate their own meaning into their works. I was trained to be a formalist. In my many years of art classes, during elementary and secondary school, undergraduate studies in painting and post undergraduate studies in architecture and design, the focus was on the formal qualities of artmaking and appreciation. While contemporary art was happening in the world around us, my teachers preached technique and materials. I never heard anything about

how to create meaning within my work. Arriving in Dr. Walker's classroom, I was confronted with radically different ideas about how to teach art than my own. Struggling to understand and accept this new approach, I was my own worst enemy. I feared that I was expected to abandon everything I knew. However, what I have come to find is that the teaching of art as a vehicle for meaning making does not ask us to abandon the learning of materials and techniques. Instead it creates a context in which the student can learn the skills involved with art making, while engaging in a significant dialog about the world around them. Using big ideas within the art classroom "offers guidance to teachers for implementing the artmaking process in a manner that encourages inquiry and discovery,"¹ artmaking then becomes, "a more meaningful activity, one based upon real world authenticity."²

The concept of using big ideas was daunting. I couldn't understand how I was going to have students develop work that was meaningful and successful with this new approach. I didn't believe they were capable of the level of critical thinking needed to use big ideas. Still, there was a lot of potential for this method to capture my students' hearts and engage them. Returning home from my first summer, having only taken the introduction to the program, *Unpacking Big Ideas*, I dove right in with a seventh grade unit using the big idea, dreams. It was a disaster. My students did not embrace this new, open-ended approach. Instead, they resisted with such ferocity that the work suffered and I eventually abandoned the project. I had given them boundaries, but not the ones they needed. Perhaps we didn't explore dreams enough, I didn't scaffold well; or they don't really remember their dreams. Judging by the outcome, my lessons were lacking something vital; something needed to change if I was going to successfully use the approach of big ideas.

The antidote for a potential disaster, like the latter, came through exploring the art-making process in Dr. Walker's fall class. Spending the semester as the art student, I chose the big idea and created art as an investigation of the idea. The series of lessons asked of me to be the art student; to examine a subject of which I thought I had great understanding, through the use of art making. Experiencing the class as a student of big

ideas proved to be extremely important. Dr. Walker's assignments changed the way I work as an artist; but more important to my work as a teacher, I began a practice of working on projects and assignments similar to those I give my students, alongside them. If I am going to ask something of my students, to engage in a new practice or experimentation, to take risks; I have to be able to ask the same of myself. Using the big idea approach also made me, as a student, my own teacher. Asking me to question, and self-reflect, and rework my art. The process asks the teacher to become more of a facilitator, with the student involved in creating his or her own understandings. To take on the role of facilitator in my own classroom, I need to create lessons that allow the students to explore a network of ideas, without my pushing information at them. Spoken in the terminology of the French philosopher, Deleuze, my students need to discover their own "rhizomatic"⁵ connections to ideas and meaning and I need to find a jumping off point with exercises that enable them to each have a meaningful, personal journey of discovery through a big idea. These personal journeys will then yield meaningful artworks that are unique, not all copies of the same teacher example.

*"Rhizomatic models work differently. They explore, wander, play around, feed words into machines to see what will come out. They come out where you may least expect them to."*⁵

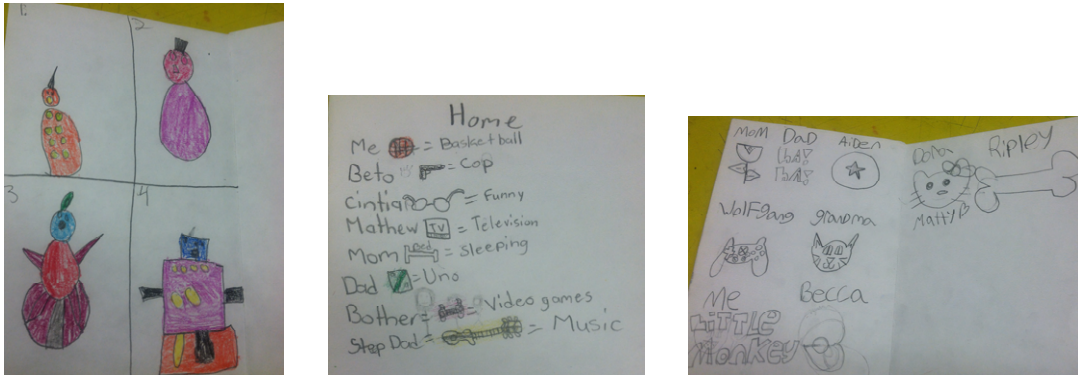
(Robert B. Siegle, Rhizomatic Writing)

*"The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing...A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back "to the same."*⁶

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, A Thousand Plateaus)

For my fifth grade students, an important part of units with big ideas has been the use of a sketchbook. Creating an origami folded book at the beginning of the year, students have used this for documenting the processes and exercises for projects related to the big ideas of family and humor. In these books, students have written funny stories, created thumbnail sketches of characters, brainstormed lists of family members and developed graphic symbols to represent each. These sketchbook activities provide space and time for the student to think and develop their own connection to the big ideas. As documentation of the process, the sketchbooks allow

me, as facilitator to take formative assessments, checking for student progress and understanding.



pages from grade 5 sketchbooks explore the big ideas of humor and family

Using the big idea approach, units and lessons are designed to have a slower pace and incorporate more exploration and thinking. Lessons and projects use concepts students know, such as opposites, group work, or creative play and place them into the context of the big idea. The big idea becomes a link or common thread connecting the individual exercises and leading to a final project. As each student forms their own relationship to, and conclusions based on the big idea; they bring these into a final project that is a more accurate expression of their understanding of the over-arching project theme. The projects then are more personal and more connected to the individual. This practice stands in opposition to the practice of a teacher demonstrating a complete project to the student and the student working to copy the example precisely.

As my fifth grade students explored the big idea of family, they worked through a series of exercises in their sketchbooks that led up to final paintings about family. In one exercise, students brainstormed a list of symbols that would represent each member of his or her family. Another exercise had students creating colorful graphic designs based on names of their family members. There were interesting and enthusiastic discussions about what each student's family looks like. Students learned some of their peers had only one parent and no siblings, while others lived in inter-generational households. In a discussion centered on the works of Grant Wood and

Sally Mann, students reflected on the works of professionals exploring family. The students were able to compare and contrast the works drawing conclusions and making connections to their own life, as well as popular culture references to family, including the TV show, Family Guy. Following this discussion, students each chose an artwork by Mann or Wood to be the inspiration for a fictional writing exercise in their sketchbooks. These exercises culminated in a final project where students explored the concept of family individually. Each work created reflects the artist and family in a unique way.



fifth grade artworks exploring family as a big idea

Before beginning my unit on peace with the second grade, I was hesitant to try a big ideas unit with young students. Could they really explore an intangible concept through artwork? Would they be able to create successful artworks that were unique, not scribble-scrabble, not filled with the typical symbolism of second graders? Would they comprehend the big picture? In the end, I was more than pleasantly surprised by the outcome. The unit was a scaffold of five lessons that involved Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, an activity adapted from Teaching Tolerance (of the Southern Poverty Law Center), a world flag ceremony and the building of a peace pole. Throughout these exercises students discussed geographic and ethnic diversity, sharing, empathy, and peace. The culmination of this group and individual work was a final painting; students designed their own flag for world peace. As a class, we brainstormed a list of images one might see on a flag for world peace. Individually, each student created a

composition for a peace flag. While many of the final works shared characteristics of flags, sunshine, rainbows and images of the earth; (all items on our class brainstorm list of ideas) the final projects were dissimilar and were designed by the students, not copied from a teacher exemplar. From project to project, student meaning making and personal connections were evident. Some students asked to look up the flag for their country of origin to include it. Others used text in their designs. Imagery based on our earlier exercises was evident, including the peace pole and our reciting the international peace prayer, “May Peace Prevail on Earth.”



2nd grade PEACE flags.

Contemporary art plays a large role in the big ideas pedagogy. Believing that students are more apt to relate to what is happening in the world today, coupled with the idea that contemporary artists are making art about today's world; the big ideas theory calls for us to incorporate the viewing and interpretation of contemporary artworks, as well as the practices of contemporary artists in our classroom. Including more contemporary artists into my lessons and allowing the time and space for student dialog about the work, has been engaging to the point of surprising. Where previously, viewing artworks had been more a brief introduction to a lesson, now the viewing discussing and interpreting of work becomes the lesson. This called for me to create a shift in my beliefs as an art teacher. While I never discounted the value of discussing art, I feel that students spend so little time engaged in hands-on art or craft making activities. I was very hesitant to reduce any of their art making time. Choosing artists with whom my students can connect has made all the difference. Watching my fifth grade students face me with arms raised while they hop up and down in their seats wanting to share a connection or idea about the work of artist and filmmaker Tim Burton or hearing the debates between students over whether the work of installation artist, Pepon Osorio is

“really art” has shown me that the increased amount of time spent in dialog about art has broadened their understanding of contemporary artists and their practices, to the point of being able to engage in these practices themselves. The use of contemporary art within the context of the big idea framework has created an environment where there is an increase in the use of contemporary art as examples for ways of thinking, as opposed to copying the style of a master artist. Student work becomes more personal while experimenting with new techniques. Rather than seeing 29 copies of a masterwork, my students produce unique pieces, using the practices of professionals. This became evident to me during my lessons with seventh grade, as we explored the big idea, nature.

To open our unit exploring nature as a big idea, the seventh graders made mini-books using various materials. In a small origami sketchbook of six pages, students drew a front cover that depicted their idea of nature, using a minimum of four natural symbols. These book covers were as expected, stereotypical imagery of a green hillside, with a broccoli shaped tree and a sun shining in the top corner. Those with slightly different ideas drew storm clouds and lightning bolts, and occasionally an animal was depicted. In each of the following classes, students were asked to revisit and reconsider those images within a set of artmaking boundaries. One day the students used only pen, and drew one item found on the front cover with at least ten different types of line. On another day, the students were given glue, scissor and random items like cotton, cardboard, raffia, leather and tissue paper to explore natural symbols with unusual materials. Working in this fashion, students began in an expected symbolic place and then began to break away from these ordinary, pedestrian ideas into more creative thinking. By the end of each students book, the images in the last pages varied greatly from each other and from the expected drawings on the front covers.

Having considered their own ideas about nature, the students needed to see how other artists work with nature. Watching *Rivers and Tides*, the documentary about the work of artist Andy Goldsworthy, my seventh grade class gasped at they saw the artists work fall apart after all his effort, they oohed and ahhed at the images of the ocean

swallowing up a giant egg shaped cairn of flat rocks. They were captivated and intrigued. Goldsworthy's practices were exciting to them. Armed with the studio exercises about nature and having seen video of Goldsworthy in action, we took to the woods. It was time to make art in nature, using nature. The outdoors now became a place to learn about art, an extension of our classroom.

Once the initial excitement over our unrestrictive, wooded environment settled down students teamed up into groups and got to work. Without pre-drawn plans or discussions, most teams formed when students began with playful experimentation individually and then were joined by a friend who thought something was interesting or had something to add. Discussions and debates about where to work and what materials to use began. Teamwork was evident and small ideas evolved into larger ones. Projects involved rocks, a small stream, fallen branches and leaves. Experimentation in balance found rocks stacking and falling down. Efforts were made to use branches to bridge the stream. Bark from fallen tree limbs were laid across cracks in a boulder. Some students made small carefully crafted art and other groups collaborated to build large structures. Even in this new environment, the stereotypical heart image found its way, but this time it was explored in new materials.



7th grade exploring the woods as an environment for artmaking

Outside, nature and art became partners each one teaching about the other. Through self-directed work, students experimented with the two and brought away new ideas. Artmaking, previously experienced as an indoor activity with precise directions and specific materials; became a process of experimentation. The goal of

making a tangible product became an experience in artistic process. Our time in the woods students stood together and watched the artistic movement of leaves, sewn together with sticks floating down the stream. Other groups learned about artmaking as a group endeavor and demonstrated the act of self-reflection naturally, without teacher direction, as they debated and discussed the next step in the work with other members of their group.

The artmaking endeavors taught hands-on environmental science lessons. Everyone came around to stroke the back of a frog caught by a fearless boy. Girls who stacked stones across tree branches that balanced between boulders demonstrated weight distribution and counter balances. Leaves were examined with closely, hands felt the strange texture of rotting wood. While determined to discover the iron full rocks used by Andy Goldsworthy, students identified the differences in stones, from quartz to granite and slate.

On returning to the indoor classroom, our unit on nature was rounded out with individual work. Each student was to create a personal Tree of Life. A theme that has been examined by artists through the years, the classes looked at images in a power point presentation. While discussing works by Gustav Klimt and Charley Harper to other that of unknown artists, themes including humanity, animal kingdom, and angels were discussed. The students were assigned to create their own tree of life. The only requirements were that they create a two dimensional work, and they were not to use brown or green. These seemingly small boundaries took students away from the stereotypical broccoli tree, and pushed them toward expanding their ideas about how a tree can be articulated through artwork. The careful consideration given the early mini-book assignments combined itself with the knowledge and creative energy created by the work outside. The resulting works displayed a range of imagery, some abstract, others full of fantasy and some representational. Students chose materials that they felt best suited the work. These pictures displayed personal connections and unique imagery that I had not seen evident in earlier works by the same students.



“My tree of life is about rising again.” -A.T. grade 7

“It looks like A-lot of lines on a paper its is about a tree, and it is a tree and trees are natural.”

–F.C. 7th grade English Language Learner

“It looks like an eagle dragon and a bunny. It’s about animals.”

–J.G. . 7th grade English Language Learner

With each of the three classes who worked in the woods, a sense of playfulness and release from artistic expectations abound. Students opened themselves up to trying something completely new. One team built a fort-like structure while a couple of girls tried to turn a rock red with the rotted trunk of a tree. There became a blur between focused artistic endeavor and playing. This contradiction between letting go and holding on is integral to Walker’s big idea theory. As much a part of the artmaking process as “formal choices, technical choices, media (and) subject matter”³, Walker asks us to integrate “playing (and) experimenting”³. The energy created where the freedom of play rubs up against the boundaries of traditional artmaking allows for an engaging, informed artistic expression.

The use of purposeful play, to inform artmaking was explored by me during my work in Dr. Walker’s class. This concept was new to my personal artmaking practice. I experimented with the use of random ideas. I cut up artworks that I considered finished, reinventing their aesthetic and meaning simultaneously. In one playful endeavor, I gave my body as an artmaking canvas for the neighborhood children to decorate with typical fodder of childhood, yogurt, brightly colored cereal and toys.⁸

Play, as a meaningful and informative activity was further explored in the one week summer intensive with Dr. Walker and Dr. Jack Richardson. Expanding on the assignment of including nonsense in artmaking, the summer course explored the ways to

create freedom and boundaries simultaneously. With the writing of French philosophers, Deleuze & Guattari, as the basis for exploring artmaking and examining pedagogy; I worked with a small group of peers. Our experimentation found us interacting with strangers and crossing the boundaries expected of our behavior, through the simple act of talking with others in a polite and unexpected manner while we rode the elevator. Using conscious play, as part of a group activity to explore meaning making would become evident in my classroom practices, as was seen with the seventh grade class in the woods.

Using the theories of Deleuze & Guattari for the conceptual basis of lesson building in my classroom; the writings on *Immanence* and *Smooth/Striated Space* ask us to consider the place between chaotic freedom and restrictive boundaries. Immanence, as seen through Deleuze is the place of encounter, where my students could experience the idea of nature in a new way. The learning through experimentation, exploration and playing with an idea opened up new areas, creating opportunity for enriching understanding. Deleuze explains this concept as related to learning to swim, and that we cannot truly learn to swim from an instructor's words, while one is outside of the water.

“To learn how to swim is to bring the singularities of one’s own body into contact with the particular depths, waves and eddies of the body of water that one enters. It is only when this happens that the problem of learning how to swim can be properly formed.

As Deleuze puts it:

‘[t]o learn to swim is to conjugate the distinctive points of our bodies with the singular points of the objective idea in order to form a problematic field’ (1994:165).

Already we can see that Deleuze understands learning as a bodily activity.”⁴

Taking the concept of artful play and experimentation into the classroom, I have made an effort to include an activity or exercise within each big idea unit that has a random or unpredicted outcome. Generally surprise is the first response from students when I ask them to deviate from expected practice. The seventh graders met me with eyes full of shock when I told them the next step in their celebrations project was to cut

up the 12"x18" colored drawing of symbols they had made into 1" squares and glue them back together; rearranging them completely randomly and without premeditation. Likewise, the fifth graders were hesitant to take the scissors to the pictures they had made about their family names, and weave them together to create new images. When I asked eighth graders to take two-dimensional drawings of personal objects and use the drawings as the basis for building a new, unique three-dimensional object some where completely baffled, to the point of frozen. I heard from students, "I don't know what to do." The open-ended part of the request was so unexpected it was almost overwhelming. Once over this initial shock and able to get on board with the idea of experimenting and giving oneself over to the process, almost every student has great success and becomes personally invested in their project.



"My artwork is about a fall Thanksgiving party. I made drawings of what reminds me of Thanksgiving and I made choices about color so it would match the theme of Thanksgiving."

-Anne, grade 7 working with the big idea Celebrations

These exercises in experimentation and release of expected outcomes all create a new experience for the student, opening up an avenue of creative expression where students have increased agency, as they are deciding the direction and the outcome of the artwork.

Despite the active participation and increased understanding I see in the student's work, I do still experience some resistance to this new way of working. Sometimes resistance has come from the few students who would prefer a sample artwork to simply copy, without thought. As my students and I step into this new style of learning and teaching art, change is required. Changes mean that expectations are altered. My students and I will encounter areas where we all need to readjust our preconceptions about the art classroom experience. It will take time as the culture of the classroom

moves from one that is teacher centered, to one where students take charge of their own learning through big ideas, investigation, experimentation and reflection.

***“What we need is more sense of the wonder of life
and less of this business of making a picture.”⁷***

Robert Henri, The Art Spirit

As I move forward, I aim to use big ideas consistently throughout the school year with all grade levels. In reflecting on lessons that have been successful and those that have not, I recognize that there are exercises from which every student can benefit and ways of working that aid in strengthening a unit of artistic exploration built around a big idea. I want to bring these together, into a basic framework for successful big idea units. Sketchbooks, a tool used by almost every professional artist will be part of this framework. Having a place for ideas to be put to paper, without the fear of it not being successful is very freeing and beneficial to the artistic process. The inclusion of contemporary artists works and practices engages students and connects their work to the work of professionals. Playful and random activities that allow students to dive into the physical process of artmaking as an investigation for learning brings validity, personal connection and independent agency to the student and their work. Bringing these components together with linking activities should create strong learning units based on the overarching themes that unite us as people, the big ideas. I hope that the artworks my students make depict, as Robert Henri wrote, “*more sense of the wonder of life and less of this business of making a picture.*”⁷

Notes:

1, 2. Walker, Sydney (2001). *Teaching Meaning in Art Making*. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications. xiv

3. Walker, Sydney (2001). *Teaching Meaning in Art Making*. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications. xiii

4. *Deleuze and the Body*, Laura Guillaume and Joe Hughes eds., Edinburgh University Press, 2011, Chapter 3, *Bodies of Learning*, Anna Cutler and Iain MacKenzie p.53)

5 Robert B. Siegle, Rhizomatic Writing

6 Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, A Thousand Plateaus

7 Robert Henri p.240 The Art Spirit

8. Rockwell, Rachel (2011). *Pose of the Child*. video work. Available on youtube:
<http://youtu.be/QQVUaUoI78Y>